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Pierre Schaeffer (2017) Treatise of Musical Objects - An Essay Across Disciplines. Translated by Christine North and John Dack. University of California Press.

Citation for published version:

Valiquet, P 2019, 'Pierre Schaeffer (2017) Treatise of Musical Objects - An Essay Across Disciplines. Translated by Christine North and John Dack. University of California Press.', *Sound Effects*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 158-164. <<https://www.soundeffects.dk/article/view/115034>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Sound Effects

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SoundEffects



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience

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Review

Pierre Schaeffer (2017)

Treatise of Musical Objects – An Essay Across Disciplines

Translated by Christine North and John Dack

University of California Press

www.soundeffects.dk



SoundEffects | vol. 8 | no. 1 | 2019

issn 1904-500X

Pierre Schaeffer's *Treatise on Musical Objects* would have been challenging to translate even in its own time. The 50-year gap since the original was published will not have made the translators' task easier. It is dense, polemical and polyphonic, offering a remarkably eclectic overview of the sonic research of its day, but arriving at conclusions which at first blush must have seemed strangely dogmatic. It dissents strenuously from the mythology of heroic invention that contemporary music so often depends upon to prove its legitimacy. Having no time for knee-jerk consensus about the force of history, Schaeffer calls his reader to step back from the rapidly intensifying march of technical and aesthetic innovation and draw new strength from disciplined reflection on first principles.

Of course, research on music and sound has expanded quite a bit since Schaeffer's day. Many of the disciplinary crossings that the *Treatise* undertakes in an exploratory mode have since been siloed and professionalised. We also now have a highly conventionalised genre of composition, dubbed 'acousmatic' by Schaeffer's disciples, which claims to be the very embodiment of the principles set forth in the *Treatise* and thus exercises a certain authority over Schaeffer's legacy. It will come as no surprise that the team responsible for this translation has been backed, and had their work vetted, by the *Groupe de Recherches Musicales* (GRM), an institution still devoted, if not to the specific research goals Schaeffer advocated, then at least to a kind of music understood to follow from the pursuit of these goals. The three brief essays that open the new translation, however, show that the term has, at best, a confused idea of the significance of Schaeffer's work. Christine North writes of the decision, in spite of the 'lapse of time', not to 'modernize' the prose for the contemporary reader (xxi-xxii). For John Dack, the book is 'too recent' to be understood in historical context (xxx). The reader faces a dilemma. Are we to understand the work as situated in the past, or is there actually no distance at all between Schaeffer's period and our own? Neither position is semiotically neutral. In fact, they work against each other.

Of course, having access to a bit more of Schaeffer's message than before will help dispel many of the misconceptions that have accumulated in anglophone scholarship about his work. Readers of this journal, for instance, may have been under the impression that Schaeffer was a composer, and one who worked exclusively in an idiom that he called *musique concrète*. By 1958, however, and as he explains at length in the introductory chapter of the *Treatise*, Schaeffer had disowned *musique concrète* and announced his preference for a more holistic research practice under the banner of 'experimental music'. This was not a naive decision, and indeed it sheds an interesting light on the way the term 'experimental music' came into broader use. Today we associate experimentalism primarily with the Cagean tradition and, by extension, with a shifting network of Anglo-American improvised and

indeterminate musics and conceptual practices. Cage's book *Silence* was not translated into French until 1970. For French readers at the time, Schaeffer wrote, the term 'experimental' would still have evoked a fundamentally scientific project. The first goal of experimental music, for Schaeffer, was to find the common attributes that linked the diverse facts and conventions of music across different times, places and cultures. His research is experimental in a sense that should bring to mind the structuralist concern with the universals of human communication. Although Schaeffer never fully identifies as a structuralist, he clearly lives in a structuralist world. There are more references in the *Treatise* to Roman Jakobson than to Edmund Husserl. Finally becoming aware of this will hopefully help anglophone scholars fill in the background that makes sense of Schaeffer's brief and, as Brian Kane has pointed out, profoundly misinformed engagement with phenomenology.

The *Treatise* serves two purposes in Schaeffer's programme of experimental music research: 1) to argue for a conceptual turn towards the structure of listening as the basis both of existing musics in their diversity and 'the musical' as a means of human expression; 2) to document an experimental practice that will enable researchers to analyse any given music in recorded form and, theoretically, to organise sound material with which to invent 'possible' musics, better adapted to the ways listeners actually make sense of sound. Like much of the thinking about culture that emerged in the 1960s, the *Treatise* combines a descriptive study of its object, the traditional forms of which are assumed to be at risk of annihilation by advancing modernity, with an ethics for improving practice in light of the problems raised by mass mediation and decolonisation. This is no coincidence. In the mid-1950s Schaeffer spent time in Africa establishing a training system for radio engineers in the French overseas services (Damome, 2012). What he seeks, then, is not a new musical practice to dominate all others, but something like a 'general musicology' (277), rooted in the study of 'collective musical consciousness' (247) and thus committed to a search for basic principles that no longer bind the world's musical practices to Western preconceptions. In this the *Treatise* can be read as a bridge linking the progressive compositional theories of James Tenney, R. Murray Schafer and Henri Pousseur with the more orthodox analytical structuralisms of Nicolas Ruwet and Jean-Jacques Nattiez. It helps to understand that Schaeffer never completely accepted the role of composer. His primary occupations were as public servant and media personality. He wrote copious reports for international bodies like UNESCO and the European Commission about the impact of new technologies on culture and education. While he was director of the research service for French radio and television in the 1960s and 70s, the French public would have been aware of him as a kind of local answer to Marshall McLuhan. He saw the trajectory of the GRM after his retirement almost as a betrayal, a retreat into preconceived, self-interested ideas about what music should be (Schaeffer, 1978, pp. 196-197). None of this information

is available in the translators' introductions, nor in their sparse editorial notes. Instead, Dack offers the utterly spurious remark that, because Schaeffer called the book a *Treatise*, we might consider comparing him to Rameau or Fétis.

The text itself ascends, as it were, from the material to the immaterial. It guides the reader from the mundane mechanics of musical 'making' and 'hearing', through a series of critiques of the study of musical sound in acoustics and phonetics, to an outline of an experimental practice – Schaeffer is keen to point out that it is *not* a system of composition (367) – based on principles more authentically aligned with the structure of human perception. In his preface, Schaeffer suggests that the best reading strategy may be to skip between sections of interest, beginning with the discipline furthest from one's own and working backwards towards more familiar territory.

Schaeffer's Introduction sets the scene for the intervention. Given the embrace of noise and dissonance in Western music, the emergence of a sophisticated technical apparatus for the manipulation and analysis of sound and the diversifying effects of decolonisation, a need has arisen for a more general account of the organisation of musical sound. Here, as in the original subtitle of the *Treatise* – which the translators' have muddled into *an essay across disciplines*, apparently in the interest of enhancing some unaccountable poetry – Schaeffer identifies his approach as an 'interdiscipline'. It is so in the sense that it juxtaposes several existing methods for studying musical sound, identifies shortcomings in their accounts of music's basic elements and proposes to subsume them under a more general relational outlook. His 'interdiscipline' is thus somewhere between a science, a pedagogy and a penance. Not only does he seek to build a bridge between physics and phenomenology, as is often remarked (Steintrager & Chow, 2018), he also wants to build musicians' moral characters in a manner that recalls both his early work as a Catholic scoutmaster (Nord, 2007) and his interest in the mystic Gurdjieff (Kaltenecker, 2010).

In Book 1, Schaeffer reflects on the origin and nature of the apparatus of music making. His compelling central claim is that music as such is a by-product of instrumentality. He forms the hypothesis that music arises when a perceptible set of varied sonic units emerges in relation to the stable ground of an instrument's material properties. Both electronic music (by which Schaeffer always means the Cologne studio, and usually in a pejorative sense) and *musique concrète* fall short of proving this hypothesis because their instrument-making practices (*lutheries*) are unsuited for producing the necessary balance between 'permanence' and 'variation'. A series of reflections follow on what Schaeffer understands as the special status of sound recording and the new styles of listening it engenders. Here he argues that the equipment itself cannot be music's focus. Phonography, for Schaeffer, is a kind of 'relay' (his unpublished lectures sometimes substitute 'loop' or 'mirror'), which, when functioning correctly, turns perception back upon itself. This is what makes

it possible to listen to a loudspeaker as if through a veil, ‘acousmatically’. In essence what Schaeffer is saying is that, although our experience of music is mediated by recording devices, we can only hear it as music when we focus attention away from the mediation. Relations between musical units exist in consciousness and not in sound.

Schaeffer is convinced that these basic musical units are special and that listeners must witness them if they are to analyse music authentically. First we must learn what these units are *not*. In Book 2, we learn to disregard the different ways that we attend to things in audition. The diagram of four listening functions (*écouter, ouïr, entendre, comprendre*) is this exercise’s most famous result. This is not the list of phenomenologically-derived attentional ‘modes’ that the anglophone literature has predominantly taken it to be, however. Schaeffer’s approach is a liberal mix of science and common sense. The different sectors of the diagram have names drawn from dictionary definitions and proceed from each other in circuits rather than as unique intentional states. The point is to understand that listening itself is not one single thing, and that it can bring us into a variety of different relationships with so-called ‘sound objects’. What the object *is at this point in the Treatise* is still unclear. What is clear is that, as useful as the different listening functions may be from a descriptive standpoint, they are, strictly speaking, not essential to the object’s existence. Book 3 proceeds to another domain that is not essential to the object. Having argued that music is not made of notes, Schaeffer must now show that it is not made of acoustical signals and distinguish his programme from psychoacoustics. He covers a broad range of issues in pitch perception, speech intelligibility and timbre to illustrate that musical listening is different from raw physical sensation. While perhaps interesting from a historical perspective, however, the section is too outdated to be of any real interest to the contemporary reader. Several passages are also marred by mistranslation. It is worrying, for example, to see *sons parasites* translated with the false cognate ‘parasitic sounds’ (153) when ‘noises’ would have been clearer and more accurate, or *réflexions* appearing as ‘rebound’ (161) instead of simply ‘reflections’.

Book 4 opens with the famous section on the derivation of the sound object by means of phenomenological reduction – a kind of listening ‘against nature’. What follows, however, is an extended engagement with the role that sound plays in linguistic, natural and musical sign systems. The course of the discussion will be difficult to reconcile with existing accounts of Schaeffer as a strict Husserlian or as a naturalist interested in everyday listening. The object of noetic reduction soon gives way to an object in dynamic, recursive, intersubjective, pseudo-phonemic structures. It begins to seem as if ‘reduced listening’ is meant to be better than other kinds of listening not for any deep philosophical reason, but simply because it seems to Schaeffer the most difficult. He certainly fails to connect it convincingly

with his digression into linguistics. At any rate the goal of the book is not to engage in philosophy, but to establish the rules of an experimental music research practice, the study of how music comes to be from the relations between human auditory perception and the sonic world.

Books 5 and 6 describe how this practice was taught at the GRM under Schaeffer. Book 5 is a guide to treating and categorising a sound library according to a system he calls ‘morpho-typology’. Here we find some detail of the technical facilities and protocols of the studio. The goal, however, is to move beyond these details – reducing technique to a ‘rightly subordinate role’ – and focus on taxonomy. Book 6 contains what is effectively the culmination of the effort: a pluralist musical training programme that does not rely on artificial sign systems, but rather derives its own system authentically from the structure of listening. This is emphatically *not* a method of composition – studies and exercises, perhaps, and analysis certainly, but only as a means of determining general criteria sufficient for cataloguing a library of tapes (474–6), not as a repository of aesthetic intuitions. The descriptions of sound quality that populate part of the *Treatise* are rich and provocative, but if Schaeffer is to be taken at his word they are only one possible set of categories out of many, a guide for study and a model for further experimentation. Again, however, the translation is frequently misleading. *Solfège*, for example, is a practice for teaching musical rudiments through aural and vocal exercise. North and Dack choose to render *solfège* alternately as ‘musicianship’, ‘music theory’ or simply ‘theory’ – sometimes multiple ways on the same page – none of which are adequate. To make matters worse, Schaeffer also uses *théorie*, *théorie de la musique* and *entraînement de l’oreille* independently of *solfège*, so the translators’ decision makes it impossible for the reader to determine which is meant without going back to the original French. Previous publications in English produced by the GRM itself have used *sol-fa*, which, although archaic, is perfectly adequate. If not, a brief footnote would have been sufficient to explain simply retaining the word *solfège*.

The incorrect translation of *solfège* also produces serious distortions in Book 7, where Schaeffer reflects on the ethical implications of the new discipline, connecting a speculative account of the universals of musical experience with what can only be described as an *acrobatic* theory of musical meaning in general. The promised understanding of how composition can be approached from an authentic archive of sound objects remains highly schematic. We find that the only way forward is to challenge ourselves to ever greater athletic and spiritual discipline. ‘Art’, writes Schaeffer, ‘is simply the sport of the inner man. All art that does not aim to be this is pointless and harmful’ (528). The ‘Penultimate chapter’, added as an afterword to the second edition, published after Schaeffer’s retirement in 1977, merely affirms the conclusions arrived at in the 1966 text. Most interesting here is the clarification of terms and methods using examples from the production of *La trièdre fertile* in 1975

– not an original composition of Schaeffer's, but a 'rehearing' of material composed by Bernard Durr (548). Once again, then, we find Schaeffer lingering in the realm of studies and exercises rather than claiming the mantle of composer.

In spite of what the translators claim in their introductions, Schaeffer's writing is far from academic. The prose is repetitive and digressive, switching voices almost as much as it switches disciplines. He takes pains to warn that he does not wish to be understood as an expert in any of the fields he explores. Some will surely read past the caveats and find only a confirmation of their prejudices – a celebration, perhaps, of the acousmatic orthodoxy that arose after Schaeffer's retirement, much to his dismay. This, unfortunately, appears to be where the translators would position themselves. Reading both the original and the translation side by side leaves one with the impression that the translators' main focus was more on preserving the mystique of post-Schaefferian acousmatic jargon than on achieving clarity. The term 'facture', for example, translates perfectly well into English as 'construction' or 'craft': Schaeffer's own definition on page 328 strongly supports this interpretation. Retaining the French term makes the prose feel pretentious and distant. We frequently find neologisms where simple translations would suffice. *Entretien* would have read perfectly well as 'conservation' or 'continuation' instead of having to stumble so often over 'sustainment'. With a bracketed clarification to differentiate it from *gamme, échelle* would have worked perfectly well as 'scale'. Most jarring of all are the translator's misguided gestures to political correctness (e.g. turning *peux rouge* into the equally inadequate 'Native American'). For better or worse, a racialised 'family of man' conception of diversity is part and parcel of Schaeffer's project. The effort to erase it shows just how badly the translators have lost the plot. It makes matters even worse to see their face-saving efforts overflow into the very modernisation they claimed to be avoiding – such as the anachronistic decision to transform *auto-mutilation* into 'self harm' (496).

There is of course much here to reward an informed reading. What makes this translation difficult to recommend, however, is the fact that the people behind it have put forward an interpretation of the *Treatise* that is so clearly against Schaeffer's explicit instruction not to follow his example to the letter. He would have bristled at the thought of a 'school' of composers being organised in his name, laughed at the thought of his work corrected by a high priesthood whose goal was to transform his experiment into the school's composition manual. Ivo Malec once suggested that the influence of the *Treatise* would be like that of Marx's *Capital*: 'It will be the least read book, but it may incidentally be the most used' (Delalande, 1976). With translation finally in hand, I fear that the situation Malec prophesised is no closer to being remedied.

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